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ABSTRACT

In John Ehle's "The Winter People," the goddess Persephone is with Hades, and winter is upon the Appalachians in full force. Ehle's novel begins as Wayland Jackson and his daughter, Paula, arrive at the home of Collie Wright and her baby, Jonathan. The Jacksons' truck has broken down on their way from Pennsylvania to Tennessee following the suicide of Jackson's terminally ill wife. Collie allows the Jacksons to stay, but this extended stay leads to family violence. The novel revolves around Collie's large family and their drinking and violence, and men's attitudes toward women, which reflect the double standard persistent in patriarchy. "The Winter People" is both strongly rooted in place and archetypal in theme. North Carolina's Appalachian Mountains have their own brand of patriarchy, with its Scots-Irish emphasis on revenge and authoritarianism. However, it is one of many brands of patriarchy, from Greek mythology to the New Testament. The world remains balanced between life and death, sacrifice and vengeance, spring and winter, and victims and patriarchs--a tenuous balance indeed. (Contains 15 references.) (NKA)

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M. Katherine Grimes

Ferrum College

Presented at the
Virginia Humanities Conference
Ferrum College
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The Altar of Patriarchy in John Ehle's *The Winter People*

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Presented at the Virginia Humanities Conference, Ferrum College, March 1998

In the myth of Demeter, Zeus gives the goddess's daughter, Persephone, to his brother Hades, the god of the dead, for a wife. In her grief, Demeter, the goddess of fruits and grains, halts the growing of food. To save humanity, Zeus asks Hades to return Persephone to her mother. Hades does this, but feeds her a pomegranate seed, the food of the dead, to ensure her return. Thus, Persephone lives most of the year with her mother, and we have spring, summer, and autumn--growth and harvest. But during one-third of the year, she returns to Hades, and we have winter.

In John Ehle's *The Winter People*, Persephone is with Hades, and winter is upon the Appalachians in full force. As in the myth, winter is created by men. In fact, the novel could be called Old Man Winter's People. And as in the myth, women and children are the primary victims.

Because I fear few of you have read the book, I'm going to give you a brief summary of the plot. Ehle's novel begins as Wayland Jackson and his daughter, Paula, arrive at the home of Collie Wright and her baby, Jonathan. The Jacksons' truck has broken down on their way from Pennsylvania to Tennessee

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following the suicide of Jackson's terminally ill wife, Ruth. Collie allows the Jacksons to warm at her fire and sleep in an outbuilding. The arrangement stretches from one night into many, and the four begin to act like a family. Collie asks her father, William, for a spot in his store, run by her brother Gudger, so that Jackson, a clock-maker, can repair clocks to earn money to repair his truck.

Jackson is soon treated like one of the Wright sons--by everyone but Gudger, who, like the prodigal son's brother, begrudges anything given to anyone else. William Wright invites Collie's guest home for dinner. While the women cook and serve, the men discuss family business. If discussions become very serious, someone closes the door to the kitchen.

The most heated discussions are about the identity of Jonathan's father. The answer is Cole Campbell, from an enemy clan. When Cole arrives at Collie's house, she tells him that she no longer wants their relationship. The drunken Cole creates such a ruckus that Wayland Jackson comes from the rock room to ascertain the problem. Campbell addresses Jackson as "ghost," as he is dressed in one of Collie's gowns because his pants are in the laundry.

Campbell and Jackson begin what sociologists assert is a typical Southern-Northern confrontation (Tye), with Jackson trying to discuss calmly and Campbell reacting with violence. The fight becomes physical and moves outside. Jackson uses the only defense he has: his superiority in cold water. He knocks his attacker into the creek, where Jackson swims even in the coldest weather. Campbell, unaccustomed to the shock, succumbs like a *Titanic* victim. Jackson and Collie pull him from the water, put him on his horse, and send him home via the creek. Along the way, however, he falls into the icy water and, although Gudger sees him and could save him, drowns.

The feud that has prevented Cole and Collie from marrying blazes, as the Campbells decide that the Wrights must have killed their favorite. The Wright men and Jackson meet to try to save themselves, and both Young, the Wrights' favorite, who was not involved at all, and Jackson say that they will leave to prevent bloodshed. Gudger--like Cain, as John Lang points out in "The Shape of Love: The Motif of Sacrifice in Two Novels by John Ehle" (74)--denies his involvement. Jackson's offer is accepted by the family, for he is an outsider and will be least missed by all but Collie, who has no say, being a woman.

As Jackson prepares to sneak away, Collie takes her beloved son to trade to his paternal grandfather for the lives of her kinsmen. Drury Campbell accepts the "life for a life" trade, and Jonathan stays with the Campbells. Drury meets with Collie's father to trade visits with the boy for a timbering deal. But it is the grandfather, not the mother, who gets Jonathan. Collie's sacrifice of her son has been lauded by numerous critics. John Lang even compares her action to Mary's and Jesus' sacrifices ("Shape" 76). It is hard to see the gift of her son to save her brothers and lover as anything but admirable. However, Collie sacrifices both Jonathan and herself on the altar of patriarchy, an institution unworthy of worship.

Patriarchy rears its head early in a conversation between Collie Wright and Wayland Jackson. She says, "My father permits a woman to drink if she isn't bearing or nursing, though I was never served as much as my brothers, seemed to me" (Ehle 20). William Wright might let his daughter drink, but he does not permit her to participate in family discussions, even when her life will be greatly affected by their outcome (Ehle 198-99). Wright says to Jackson, ". . . [H]ere men don't bargain with women, never have . . . . My mother never even sat down to the dinner table with her husband and sons, nor did my sisters" (Ehle 45). In fact, after the Wright men decide that Wayland Jackson will leave, Collie is not even told (Ehle 210). Drury Campbell is like his enemy William Wright. When Collie comes to bargain with him, he says, "Miss Wright,

I've done a world of trading in my time, and I learned early on that a man can't bargain with a woman. It's not the same, their minds don't work the same way" (Ehle 222).

Men's attitudes toward women also reflect the double standard persistent in patriarchy. When Cole Campbell comes to Collie's house, he assumes that she will have sex with him on command and do his bidding. When she tells Cole's father that Jonathan is Cole's son, Drury challenges her: "My experience is that an unwed mother who will lie down with one man can be had by others as well" (Ehle 227).

Under patriarchy, women have few options. Collie's mother, Annie Wright, withdraws, saying that she is sick. As Collie explains to Jackson, her mother "never did pay enough attention to Young" (Ehle 69), or to her other children, we presume. William Wright says to his son Gudger, "Your mother was fussing this morning about being left alone . . . . Come a time when your mother'll have to grow up" (37-38). But it is hard for women to grow up when their society treats them like children.

Collie reacts by rebelling against one man, her father, only to submit to another, Cole Campbell. And Collie says she gives up her son not to save her lover and brothers but to make amends. She says, "It fell to me to complete what I started. There wasn't any escape left to me" (Ehle 236). So under the rules of the patriarchy, she must atone for her fornication by sacrificing the person she loves most.

Of course, any time one group of people victimizes another, both groups suffer. Men are not immune to the pain caused by the patriarchy they perpetuate. Although a grown, married man, Gudger Wright must submit when William brings Wayland Jackson into Gudger's store. Young Wright and Cole Campbell, both the youngest in their families and the most spoiled, eschew any responsibility, either for earning a living or for marrying and rearing their

children. Their rebellion also includes secret friendship and Cole's relationship with Collie Wright. Other men, such as Skeet Campbell, turn their impotence in the patriarchy into violence, torturing and killing both animals and men.

Patriarchy also gets in the way of male-female relationships, only one of which in the entire novel is successful. Annie Wright nags at her husband to stay home and care for her; William sees her as a whiny child. Drury Campbell got his first wife in a land deal. He tells Wright about asking for a dowry with land and stock; getting none, he told his prospective father-in-law, ". . . [W]ell, when you've thought it over, let me hear from you . . . . [A]long toward Thanksgiving he drove up with her in a red wagon with a Guernsey cow and a right pretty horse and a deed to fifty-one acres in Tennessee" (Ehle 238).

Gudger leaves his wife, Helen, lying in bed as he prowls the countryside spying on his sister and brother. Young Wright has a long-standing affair with a widow, Benie Frazier, who says to him, "I want to marry you and have babies before it's too late" (194), but he does not want the responsibility of a family. Cole Campbell, too, refuses to defy his father by marrying the daughter of his father's enemy.

Only the outsider, Wayland Jackson, has a decent, respectful relationship with a woman. When he arrives at Collie Wright's house, he asks for warmth rather than demanding it. He sleeps in an outbuilding rather than asking to sleep in the warm house. He does not force himself on her sexually but waits for her invitation. He makes a clock for her home. And he marries her. As Joseph Connelly says in "Adjusting the Codes, Affirming the Place: Ehle's *The Winter People*," unlike Cole, Jackson "relies on the life principle and basic human dignity" (116). Collie finds work for him, provides him a place to stay, talks with him as an equal, falls in love with him, and marries him. She also sacrifices her child to save his life. Wayland Jackson has an advantage over other men in Collie Wright's life: he was not reared in the mountain patriarchy.

He can be much less concerned about gender stereotypes, wearing Collie's gown, helping with household chores, and caring about his daughter's well-being more than his own masculinity.

However, the atmosphere of machismo in the mountains affects him after a time, as we see in his reactions to the bear hunt. He realizes that part of the reason he wants to go is that Collie wants him not to, and "[h]e had to maintain a degree of autonomy" (Ehle 67). Connelly believes that Collie wants him not to go on the hunt because she does not want him to be like the other men (Ehle 116). His decision to go on the hunt makes him feel "superior" to his former self, "or at least different" because he defies Collie and Paula (Ehle 68), even though "Collie told him he had hurt her deeply, agreeing to the hunt" (Ehle 67).

While with the men in the hunting cabin, Jackson glories in his manhood: "There was no mirror in this place, nor any other feminine niceties. No woman would stay up here, no child would ever be born here or could survive here, he imagined. It was a male place, and he was beginning to accept it, admire it as such" (Ehle 90).

This masculine pride continues after Jackson bests Cole Campbell. "He stood straight up . . . , feeling the body of the new man, himself, a victor over Cole . . ." (Ehle 145). This attitude continues as he realizes that he has killed Jonathan's father and will become Jonathan's father. "Tonight," he thinks, "he was the father surviving. Also he was the slayer of the father" (Ehle 172). It continues as he decides to take himself and his daughter away to keep from getting killed and to keep the Wrights out of danger. Although William Wright asks him three times if he wants to talk with Collie (granting that his daughter is "not likely to be much help in making a decision like this"), three times he says no, he will decide for himself (Ehle 205, 207). The "new man" is really just a version of an old one, a man who has assumed his role in the patriarchy. As much as men express their physical and social superiority over women, they

realize that women have strengths as well. When Drury Campbell falters after Cole's death, he reaches for his daughter, Margaret (Ehle 162). Milton Wright says to his brother Young about Young's lover, Benie Frazier, "Women can adapt, you know that. If they wasn't good at that, they'd not be able to put up with men at all" (Ehle 103). Young says to Milton, "That's what a man does [Collie] said, keeps saving his life, and what a woman does is to give her life" (Ehle 105). Even Jackson knows that women sacrifice for men. He says to Collie after she has given up her son, "I never was sure Ruth [his first wife] loved me. . . . She'd say she did, but she never sacrificed anything. She gave me herself, but she gave me what she had to give some man, didn't she?" (235). Cole's death provides the symbol of women's strength over men. Mrs. Crawford is laying him out for burial and cuts the clothes off the corpse to put new ones on. When he is naked, she "placed her own green-and-white bonnet over his genitals . . ." (Ehle 156). As the women dress the dead man, the bonnet slips, and Cole's "shriveled bag and penis" are revealed briefly (Ehle 157). Cole is so emasculated that even a woman's bonnet fails to hide his loss.

Many critics have asserted that Collie Wright's sacrifice of her son defeats the patriarchy. Drury Campbell is established as the epitome of patriarchy. John Lang calls him "the wrathful patriarch of Old Testament theology" ("Shape" 76). Leslie Banner writes,". . . [W]hen Collie visits the Campbell compound, Ehle provides all of the standard popular appurtenances of an Appalachian patriarch . . . Drury Campbell, patriarch and feudal lord of the Appalachian clan" ("John Ehle" 18). Lang asserts that Collie's sacrifice "overturns the patriarchal assumptions of the Wright family" ("Shape" 75) and that in *The Winter People* " . . . the code of the clan as represented by the patriarchal Drury Campbell [yields] to the ethic of love represented by Collie Wright" (72). Joseph Connelly also writes that "Collie's intervention [in the fight between Wayland Jackson and Cole Campbell] preserves the life principle" (115).

Certainly Collie defies the patriarchy by bargaining directly with her father's enemy without her father's help, permission, or knowledge. Certainly her sacrifice is worthy of great admiration, even though cynics might say she trades her son to keep her lover. At one point, she whispers "'Jesus,' . . . sitting up on the bed staring at Jonathan" (Ehle 136), and when the Campbells register Collie's son as one of their own, his initials become "J.C." Like Jesus, Jonathan is "the baby born to be sacrificed" (Ehle 121). Despite Margaret Campbell's declaration that "no mother can sacrifice a baby . . ." (Ehle 225), Collie certainly sacrifices hers.

But in the end, is the patriarchy defeated? Collie Wright loses her son. His two grandfathers, one a widower and one whose wife who has abdicated her role as mother, are rearing the boy and using him as a bargaining chip in their trades. William Wright tells Jackson that he will not give Jonathan back to Collie. Wright says, "She sold him. That was her trade. Now I've made mine." Although Jackson challenges, "You can't buy and sell human beings," Wright refuses to back down, and Collie will have "to visit her own son" (Ehle 243).

Collie Wright does a victory. She deals a life for a life rather than letting Hammurabi's code dictate the events following Cole's death. She brings about the ending her father indicates he wants in his conversation with Drury Campbell after Cole is killed:

"We will all die, what say, Mr. Wright?"

"We will all die," Wright replied.

"It is written that the wages of sin is death. What say, Mr. Wright? Any sin here?"

"The gift of God is eternal life," Wright said, "through Jesus Christ our Lord."

"An eye for an eye, Mr. Wright," Drury said.

"Forgiveness is mine, saith the Lord," Wright replied.

Drury shrugged . . . . (Ehle 165)

Drury Campbell represents the Old Testament; William Wright, the New. Collie's sacrifice of Jonathan allows the New Testament, with its emphasis on sacrifice, forgiveness, and mercy, to triumph over the vengeful nature of the Old. But sacrifice is sacrifice, and as long as the patriarchy demands sacrifices of its women and children, whom the patriarchs can buy, sell, and trade, along with cattle and land, then the patriarchy wins the war, no matter who wins the battles.

Like most good literature, *The Winter People* is both strongly rooted in place and archetypal in theme. North Carolina's Appalachian Mountains have their own brand of patriarchy, with its Scots-Irish emphasis on revenge and authoritarianism. But it is one of many brands of patriarchy, from Greek mythology to the New Testament. Demeter created winter when the patriarchy of the gods deprived her of her daughter. The Christian God darkened the world for three days when Roman and Jewish patriarchs conspired to kill his son. And the Appalachian winter mirrors the coldness of Collie Wright's heart after losing her son. Spring comes when patriarchies are defeated, if only for a time--when Persephone returns to Demeter, when Jesus rises from the dead at Easter, and when Drury Wright brings his grandson to the Wright in a symbol of unification. But spring never lasts, and winter always returns. If women--Demeter, Mary, Collie Wright--represent the idea of life, through childbirth and nurturing, men--Hades, the Roman and Jewish authorities who murder Jesus, Drury Campbell--represent death. Persephone must return to Hades. Jesus cannot stay on earth in his human form. And Collie Wright's son is dead to her until Drury Campbell is literally dead. The sacrifice on the altar of patriarchy continues. The only hope is for parental love to melt the hard hearts of the patriarchs. Demeter has the power to melt Zeus's because he fears for mortals, who will starve without Demeter's blessing on the land. God can melt the hearts of earthly men because he sent Jesus to die for them. And Collie Wright

uses her son to stave off the deaths of her brothers and lover by melting the heart of Drury Campbell.

Thus the world remains balanced between life and death, sacrifice and vengeance, spring and winter, and victims and patriarchs. It is a tenuous balance, indeed.

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